

“Speak Up!”

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When we English teachers sit down to reflect on the results of our teaching, we always have certain misgivings about speaking skills. More often than not, we feel that something is missing. It is as if we were giving students the tools but not the chance to use them.

In teaching grammar rules we give the students innumerable tests to measure the extent to which they have internalized these rules. But this is not enough. The next steps should encourage the students to use the tools we have given them-grammar rules, vocabulary, etc.-to produce the language themselves.

With groups as large as those we have in state schools, there is always the temptation to just relax and teach in a traditional way-the grammar-translation method-followed by tests that simply measure the students’ passive knowledge, depriving them of the most creative part in the process of learning a foreign language.

We are not satisfied with this state of affairs. In spite of difficulties and unfavourable circumstances, we are trying hard to find a way to get the students to speak.

A Weekly “Speak Up” Lesson

I am going to relate an experience we had in our school that may be of help to colleagues who find themselves in similar circumstances.

Because of new regulations, last year we had the opportunity to split large groups of students into two groups once a week. It was this chance to deal with a class of just 15 or 17 students that made us think of this weekly lesson as the “speak up” lesson. The small number of students made it much easier for the teacher to handle them, put them into pairs or groups, and give them tasks that encouraged them to speak.

The idea was to use in a more active way the language they had learnt passively in previous lessons, adapting it to given situations. Preparing these simulations or roleplays is highly motivating for the students, with the teacher there only to provide information they might need, mostly on vocabulary, and to clear up any doubts they might have regarding pronunciation, intonation, etc.

The important point is the fact that it is the students themselves who ask for information, because they need certain words to express what they want to say. It is this factor that differentiates this activity from traditional teaching, where the teacher usually gives a lecture about “very interesting things for everybody”-except for the students, who just listen and perhaps make a note, but nothing more.

The aim of our approach is to have the students do something with the language, to actively use the language they produce themselves for the situation. They must acquire new identities, become someone else, and speak accordingly-a salesman, a postman, a parent, a son or daughter, etc. Apart from this being fun, they have an opportunity to show how creative and imaginative young people can be. We are often surprised to discover in certain students a new personality we did not know existed, which reveals them as much abler to express themselves in the target skill than we had realized.

One thing that can help to motivate students is a video camera. They prepare their dialogues and conversations much more carefully when they are going to be seen on the screen by their fellow students and themselves. At first they are a bit shy, but in the end they love being recorded, watching themselves, and listening to the sound of their voices speaking English-there is a kind of mystery to it. In previous years we used audio tape recorders, but it is not the same. Eventually they will get used to the video camera, but meanwhile the spell remains, and we teachers are entitled to make the most of it for the sake of the students' speaking skills.

A Three-step Procedure

There are several steps in the procedure we have used:

1. The first session consists of a thorough explanation of the entire project, with emphasis on the fact that they can improve their marks. They should know from the beginning that their speaking activities are to be video recorded, if this is the case. If this facility is not available, audio recording will do.

Once this is clearly understood, we give the students the situations they have to work out-similar to the ones they have come across in their previous lessons-referring them to the pages of their textbooks where they can get help. For example, a situation could be: parents and children on an island or in a village, where the children inform their parents that they want to leave, while the parents try to persuade them to stay, and so on. They listen to a recording in the target language, repeat the most important structures they will be needing, and then they are left on their own to prepare the conversation, with encouragement to act it out as they create it.

Then bombarding the teacher with questions begins, and all s/he has to do is to go from group to group, answering questions, clearing up the doubts of students who are suddenly eager to learn and to use this information in an active way. A set of dictionaries is a useful help.

2. In the second lesson the students are supposed to rehearse the sketches they have prepared. This time their questions should be mostly on pronunciation, intonation, rhythm, etc. If time allows (with such small groups it usually does), the teacher should listen to each group before the recording is made, so that some mistakes are detected and corrected beforehand. Finally, the recording takes place. Sometimes one of the students is interested in using the camera, and then the activity becomes almost entirely theirs, with the teacher just discreetly supervising the activity, letting spontaneity spring up and produce good results.

Viewing the recordings is such fun for the students that it is best to let them enjoy it immediately after it is done.

3. A further step consists of a more serious viewing, with the aim of analysing errors. The students are told to have a sheet of paper and a pen at hand so that they can note down any mistakes they recognize as they view each group on the video. After each performance the video is stopped and students comment, starting with self-criticism and ending with comments from anyone who has something to say. Usually, interesting points arise about certain ways to pronounce some sounds that otherwise would have passed unnoticed. Through this error-analysis activity, many points of grammar and phonetics are reviewed, with choral repetition of the correct version.

A Summing Up

The entire process worked out quite satisfactorily with our students. Many have shown considerable enthusiasm, while others had to be encouraged or even pushed into doing an activity that was entirely new to them.

This activity can be performed with any kind of textbook, even if its approach is not communicative. As long as it presents some kind of content that is interesting to the students, it is easy to have them convert a piece of narrative into a roleplay and act it out in a realistic way. All they need is a bit of encouragement. To provide this we use all the possible devices we can think of-a video camera, a competitive spirit, a chance to improve marks-anything that serves the purpose. And the purpose here is to have the students articulate the words they have chosen to express their thoughts -in short, create the situations and provide the circumstances for them to speak.